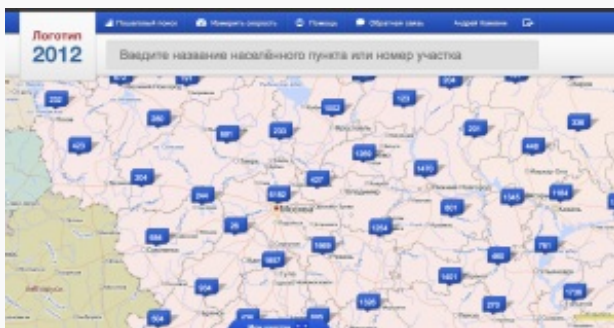


Russian Elections: the struggle for power between state and network society

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New media technologies are having an interesting impact in places where we thought political communications had become bogged down. One of them was Russia As Polis Silverstone Scholar Gregory Asmolov explains, both activists and the Russian state are using digital technologies in ways that is changing the terms of democratic debate and the struggle for control over information. Here Gregory explains how both online protests and a vast project to install CCTV monitoring at voting stations symbolize the battle over what democracy means in the digital age.



Russia's Government webcam monitoring website

Information technologies can turn any person into a potential 'sensor' that can identify, digitalize and share a piece of information with a worldwide network of people. This capacity has very significant impact on election monitoring. In particular, it can be seen at the recent Russian elections. Unlike in previous political cycles, this time the election to Russian parliament (Duma) on December 4th triggered a significant wave of protests.

The Internet and liberal media were occupied by flow of citizen-generated information about fraud during the elections

to the Russian Parliament. As a response, dozens thousands of people went to the streets and demanded fair elections (unprecedented in Putin's Russia). Both, the collection and proliferation of information about the falsifications or fraud, as well as organization of protests in response to this information were enabled by information technologies.

The elections to Duma were not the last election in this political cycle. On March 4th Russian will elect a new president. Once the power of the Internet could be witnessed following the elections to Duma, both sides – the citizens who demand fair elections and the government that is interested to protect the legitimacy of the voting started to prepare for the next round. On the citizen side we could see many various innovations. On the other hand, authorities made efforts to neutralize the network power of citizen and harness it within state's initiatives.

Balance of Power

The key factor for understanding this struggle is the change in the balance of power around election monitoring. The balance changed due to increasing role of information communication technologies (ICT). In a classical model of surveillance, state follows its citizens and the power relationship has a strong hierarchical nature between the observer and the observed. The state has both, resources and the legal right to do it.

Philosopher Jeremy Bentham's model of Panopticon brilliantly describes these types of hierarchical relationships. But what happens, if the other side of Panopticon – the public – changes its nature? That is what is happening.

First, it is empowered by new tools for surveying the center (e.g. mobile phone with cameras that can document frauds). But what is even more important, that unlike in classical Panopticon, the other side become networked. It can immediately share the information with the entire network and make it public. It is also empowered by crowdsourcing platforms for election monitoring that simplifies the process of monitoring and sharing. Moreover, since the citizen side of Panopticon is networked it can not only observe and share, but also self-organize and coordinate complicated surveillance operations.

The increasing capacity of citizens to be a networked sensors, significantly threaten the legitimacy of elections (if it has a high degree of fraud) and change the balance of power. The degree of transparency increases despite the attempts of the authorities to avoid it.

State Strategies

As a response, the state tries to use various strategies and tactics to limit the impact of the citizen based sensors and restore the balance of power to previous point.

It included DDoS attacks that blocked some of the key platform for collection of distribution of information including crowdsourcing monitoring platform "[Karta Narusheniy](#)", Livejournal blogosphere and few liberal media. The crowdsourcing platform was also prosecuted by chief prosecutor's office and its legitimacy was attacked by state sponsored information campaign. At the same time the videos with frauds that were published on YouTube were declared by prosecutor as "falsification of falsification" and American cover operation (since the movies were hosted by American server in California, meaning YouTube).

At the same time, Russian authorities were also proactive. They suggested creating an alternative system of sensors that is supposed to be more powerful and systematic, than relatively sporadic citizen based monitoring. Prime minister Putin offered to put two webcams on almost every polling station in Russia (more than 90.000) and create a special website where anyone can watch live webcast from any of polling stations.

Surveillance Systems

[Webvybory 2012](#) project is actually creation one of the largest surveillance systems in a very short period of time. It is a huge Internet based Panopticon. This type of Panopticon is also very expensive – about half billion dollars. It is also not a classical Panopticon since it allows access to its sensors to citizens. The latter point emphasizes the complexity of this phenomenon. Who is observer in this case and who is observed? The project not only tries suggest alternative point of view to citizen-based crowdsourcing monitoring systems, but also harness the networked power of citizens and embed their eyes within state sponsored system of sensors. Moreover, the capacity of the state sponsored system to catch frauds is more than debatable.

To conclude, we witness a struggle between various monitoring systems, when different types of sensors are supported by different type of innovations. This struggle is not only about creation of surveillance systems but also about mobilization of networked power of citizens within particular system. Will state be successful to harness the power of citizens, and reduce the relative contribution of citizen-based sensors? This question is difficult to respond since what we are witnessing is ongoing struggle, when every side introduces new strategies, tactics and tools.

But what is even more important is that this story is not only about election monitoring. It is about governance in

general. Information technologies lead to a shift in power balance between states and citizens in many areas. In some cases, the traditional institutions adjust to the new information environment, and reduce the tension by creation of new mechanisms for collaboration. But some political systems are just not able to go through this type of transformation and therefore they choose the path of confrontation with network society.

Illusion of Transparency

In the Russian case we can see how the state substitute the transformation, with using information technologies to create an **illusion of transparency**. Moreover, the same technologies are used to create **illusion of governance and control**. But the more the illusions are far going, the easier to expose them with the same tools that were used to create them, while the only people who trust these illusions are those who created it. Eventually, this all might lead to increasing tension and instability between traditional political institutions and network society. Therefore, the current struggle around election monitoring in Russia, will probably not end on the day of presidential elections, but just enter into a new phase.

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Click on this link to read a [longer academic version of the Web Governance paper](#)

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